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Lake Forest Students Conquering the Neuroscience Frontiers

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Pictured above are students who attended the meeting. Bottom row from left to right: Kayla Ahlstrand, Jaime Pérez, Daryn Cass, Alina Konnikova, Natalie Simak. Top row: Peter Sullivan, Danny Sanchez, Keith Solvang, Mike Fiske, and Carlos Becerra.

After weeks of preparing and working on perfecting our presentation, the day has come. Between October 17th and 20th, Chicago hosted one of the most highly attended meetings in the nation: Society for Neuroscience. 30,000 people, including numerous neuroscience specialists and Nobel Prize winners, from all over the world attended the meeting. After years of waiting, Lake Forest College students are finally able to attend the meeting.

I did not know what to expect because I have never been to such a popular event. I did know, however, that I had put my best effort into my presentation, and it was time to conquer the meeting. To my surprise, the meeting started with a presentation on magic. What is the connection between the brain and magic? Two famous magicians, Appollo Robins and Eric Mead, demonstrated how our memory, perception, and attention can be used to practice illusion and magic. For example, Appollo Robins invited a gentleman from the audience on stage and asked him to follow the quarter with his eyes. By focusing his attention on the quarter, within two minutes, he was able to take the gentleman's wristwatch from his wrist, his cell phone, and his wallet – which was on the inside of his jacket. As the audience was appalled and fascinated, Robins gave a simple explanation that linked events to the primary topic of the symposium: the brain.

After numerous exciting presentations, it was time to put on our game faces. On the first day of undergraduate presentations, Danny Sanchez, my partner in crime, and I waited in anxiety for the first person to come by our presentation. After couple of minutes of waiting we caught our first prey. She was a lovely lady with a beer in her hand who was eager to hear about our research. She told us that she did not know anything about our topic, which made our life a lot easier. The experience was completely different from what we had practiced. The lady asked questions after almost every figure we discussed whereas we had practiced having all questions at the end of our presentation. This change-up took us by surprise but it made the presentation interactive and much more fun. That night, we did five more presentations; each had its own twist to it, which made the experience even more special.

After a successful day, we were excited to come back the next day. Day two was different from the previous day. We found ourselves in a room with not only undergraduates but also PhDs, post doctorates, and others. We knew that world experts on our topic would be present, and we were warned ahead of time to look out for a couple of names. The first two presentations were very successful and we received a lot of positive feedback. The third person to visit our presentation did not have a nametag. However, when I asked, "Do you know anything about Parkinson's disease?" He said, "Yes. I discovered the budding yeast model for studying Parkinson's disease." The pressure was on. After the most stressful fifteen minutes of my life, Tiago Fleming Outeiro complimented us on our work. To hear a compliment from an expert in the field of neuroscience was one of the best rewards of the night. Danny and I had passed the ultimate challenge of the night. We succeeded in giving a presentation to someone who we thought would be the most critical person of the night.

Every presentation of the second evening was special in its own way. Each listener had its own interpretation of our data and offered interesting ideas and possible experiments. The highlight of the night was when a lady stopped by that does research on a mammalian model and she wanted to test our most significant results. Research performed on mammalian models is a step closer to finding an effective therapy and/or cure for Parkinson's disease, which is the ultimate goal of the scientists studying this devastating disease. Danny and I felt honored to know that our research will potentially be incorporated into somebody else's work and one day even save lives. Overall, our ten hour days were full of exciting presentations, tasty food, and bonding time with fellow Lake Foresters.